PROCEDURE FOR WRITING THE SCRIPT TREATMENT

THE CONFERENCE:

See me for planning this in advance. You will get only a C- as your best possible grade if you do not come in for a consultation before writing your treatment. You may do an adaptation or an original idea. You may do a more experimental or open structure than is described here; in that case, you have to spend more time detailing what the shots look like and what's on the sound track. I will also handle the revisions.

The treatment is due, typed, double space, in paragraph form on 2/16, Tuesday, at the beginning of class. It is 8-10 pp. of prose description, written in the present tense like a short story. It must be for an original screenplay. It may be for a fictional or experimental film or video. It can also be an adaptation from literature.

I will be scheduling appointments for the treatment conferences. Keep in mind that I have specific times set aside to be available for consultation. I cannot accommodate everyone the last week. So it is important to set up a conference with me as soon as possible. The purpose of the meeting is to identify potential weak spots in the narrative and to resolve problems of structure, character development, beats, etc. This means that you must come to the conference with a story idea in hand and at least a rough, written outline of how that story idea will be developed. You need to know your major characters and environments, and you should also have written out your climaxes for each of the three acts. You may also talk about revising other work for a higher grade.

For those of you who want to go on to do more film and video production, I suggest you do a treatment of something you might really film. In that case, let your real production needs limit your treatment's scope (think in advance about equipment you'll have for production and editing, amount of money you have to spend, releases needed for a documentary, etc.); plan to use originally scored or public domain music, not pop music for which the rights are very expensive.

THE TREATMENT:

The treatment is sometimes called a story outline; it tells the action in story form. Write it just like a short story. Examples of treatments are given in Armer, pp. 31-32 and the Appendix ["The Mark: Treatment for a Television Movie"]. A treatment is written in paragraphs in the present tense and typed double space. The first time the characters' names appear, they are typed in capitals. Change paragraphs to indicate change of time and place. Avoid lapsing into the past tense; that is a sign of unprofessionalism and should be avoided. Don't say things like, "Close up of...." The one exception is that you may indicate a shot or some dialogue when this is essential to how the story unfolds: for example, "The camera reveals the jewels hidden on a shelf in the closet while the young man protests to the arresting officer that he never left home last night."

The purpose of writing a treatment is to evaluate a story early and find its weaknesses so you can correct them before writing the screenplay. You can identify and then expand and enrich your areas of strength. Everyone has weak areas in their first versions, but in the treatment stage it is easy to make changes. A common weakness is that you may need more beats. A second need is usually to expand on one of the four kinds of storylines that Miller describes and which we will spend time discussing in class (external, task-oriented line; internal, psychological or moral storylines; interpersonal storylines; subplots, often with minor characters).

The major narrative structure usually shows a main character trying to reach a goal and some powerful force or person(s) fighting to prevent it. It is easiest to start by imagining three major crises or landmarks. Work toward developing those in scenes that are both colorful and honest, and deal with one major crisis in each section or "act." Before you start out, you must decide how the story will end. The first two crises often highlight the setbacks the major character faces.

The second way to flesh out your outline is to look at the way that William Miller presents a treatment of a MARY TYLER MOORE episode, which is in a handout that will be distributed in

class. Miller analyzes that episode in terms of four kinds of storylines. You should have these four kinds of storylines in your treatment. They are the external storyline, the interpersonal storyline(s), the internal storyline(s), and the subplots. The external storyline tells how the task or objective gets done -- the action in the "outside" world. The interpersonal storylines depict relations between characters. The internal storylines develop interior psychological or spiritual conflicts. The subplots usually begin about a third of the way in and develop minor characters or past events in the main characters' lives that help explain their motivation or current problem. These storylines weave together and often get resolved together at the crisis. Armer also presents examples of treatments on pp. 44-45 and 250-57.

You may want to write out something about each scene or crisis that you most readily think of on a 3"x 5" card. Add more scenes, each on its own card. You can think of putting your characters together in various pairings, or showing someone in various environments and social situations. If there is a "lover," make sure you give that person a life and thoughts of her/his own. Try building a subplot, or show the various kinds of storylines that Miller talks about. Think of where you want each storyline to be wrapped up, the most emphatic and important one being wrapped up with the final climax. Put the cards out on the floor to see where the various story elements fit together and where additional scenes will be needed. New characters may emerge. The plot may go in different directions than you had first imagined. If you find a new and wonderful ending, you can change what has come before to fit the new ending.

Robert McKee, author of STORY, suggests having three stacks of 3-by-5 cards, one for each act. Use a one or two sentence statement to what happens in a scene, with a separate card for each scene. On the back of each card, jot down notes about what function you want this scene to fulfill in the story design, at least for the moment. Do this for central plot and subplots or B-storylines alike. You have to be strict and know that many of your ideas here will be discarded. Others can be set in different locations, or have different characters advance the plot at that moment. When you have the scenes firmly organized around a great story climax, ask a friend for a cup of coffee and pitch the screenplay to them, so you can look at their face and see their reactions. You want to see when they are hooked and when their eyes wander, and when you get to the climax, do you get the kind of strong reaction from your listener that you want. That's McKee's advice.

Think about the relations between the characters. What has happened just before this scene? Give details, especially visual ones, that demonstrate the character's looks, habits, moral stance, gestures, social class, or mindset. Characters have to have contradictory impulses, and so they may change as you create them. What happens to the characters should grow out of the major story incidents and not be preconceived.

The first part should be simple. It establishes the basic story line, introduces all the major characters, establishes most of the exposition. Subplots often begin about a third of the way in, and the last section has the highest point of tension. A scene shows interaction between characters and usually has unity of time and place. Build in tension, so that the obstacles are increasingly more threatening. That is called "progression." Change pace by moving to different environments. Use foreshadowing. In any time-based work, it is a good idea to start strong and end strong.

A scene may also show a montage of different things tied together by a dramatic motif (war, Broadway, newspaper headlines from around the world, etc.) Describe the physical setting. You may want to change settings later so as to make them "say more," in dramatic terms.

Be clear about your deep structure or theme. Use a deep structure that has a personal meaning for you, even if you cloak your deepest concerns in characters or events distant from your experience. Consider the many ways you can build audience identification with the story or with your main characters. You can find characters to develop a theme, or you can start with an interesting character and develop problems for him/her to go through. Invest your characters with traits you observe in people around you or in yourself--that adds complexity and "realism," which even villains should have. Don't set up the conflict in simplistic terms of good and bad.

Make it more complex than that. Avoid presenting a woman as a victim in a stereotypical way. If the story is very personal, change the people to be out working and not in college, and move them to another part of the country--you will need the distance to turn yourself and your loved ones' experience into a story, and all of you into characters.

If you are stuck on how to build a scene, remember that almost every good scene is built on conflict.-- conflict with others, with the environment, with the uncanny, or with oneself. Audiences relate to people; that's what screenplays are all about. Show rather than tell. When exposition is communicated visually or is part of a character's emotional makeup, it's less obvious that you are providing needed background information. For example, show poverty; don't just explain it. It's easier to give expository information inside a scene with conflict or during action. Use the actor well, and have things expressed non-verbally or in terms of body language.

If you are stuck, now is the time to do some reading. Look at your textbooks or at the many books on screenwriting in the library, including the scripts of many famous Hollywood films. Here are some of Dona Cooper's ideas. We discussed part of her theory in class already when working on spines:

Designing the Roller Coaster of Audience Experience

Dramatic Center

What is your dramatic center? What is the emotional essence of your story?

What is being climaxed at the big dramatic moment at the end? What draws you to this subject?

What new insight do you have into the topic? What is your concept's biggest hook?

Plot Structure

What truly fascinates you about the material?

How does the plot depend on and develop the characters' behavior? their attitudes? their skills? the problem? the situation? how the person solves the problem? why s/he is facing the problem?

What type of change are you writing about? Interpersonal? Societal? Internal? Situational?

Describe the obstacle course your plot is creating?

How do you increase dramatic stakes? Obstacles? Desperation?

Likelihood of change? Knowledge?

How do you use the audience's curiosity? suspense? doubt? desire?

How do you use and develop an antagonist or various antagonists?

How do you convey new information?

How does your plot help viewers bond to the story?

Characterization

How does your plot help viewers bond to the characters? What universal emotions can the audience can relate to?

How do you show the hero's mindset and emotions? How does the hero feel about her/himself?

What do you show of her/his small moments?

Emotional Roller Coaster

What do you want your audience to feel? What new understanding do you want them to gain?

What questions should the audience be asking? Where should they find the answers?

Where is information provided non-verbally?

How and where does dramatic action provide information? an emotional charge?

How do you shape the ups and downs and quality of the audience's feelings?

Where should the audience feel hope? dread? excitement?

How does your roller coaster provoke emotion? When does it provoke each specific emotion?

Plot the overall shape of the emotional roller coaster which you are trying to design.
Plot what you expect of audience response both emotionally and cognitively
[i.e., their problem solving processes].